



The Walk to Bethlehem Devotions

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church's Health & Wholeness Committee has sponsored this Church-wide Program to increase the health of body, mind, and spirit.

INTRODUCTION

Walking is mentioned 247 times in the Bible. Our bodies were made for walking. We were built to stand erect. Our organs function best when given room to work. Our joints need movement to maintain good range of motion. None of this can be accomplished by sitting in a chair or lying on a couch. The benefits of walking are numerous. In a report from the US Surgeon General, “significant benefits can be obtained by including a moderate amount of physical activity (30 minutes of brisk walking or raking leaves, 15 minutes of running or 45 minutes of playing volleyball) on most days of the week. “The benefits of walking are compelling. Regular walking can prevent depression, lengthen lifespan, lower stress levels, relieve arthritis and back pain, strengthen muscles, bones and joints, improve sleep.”

With all of these benefits, why wouldn't we want to walk? The 21st century time crunch and the multi-task generation is the problem. With this in mind, The Walk to Bethlehem provides an opportunity for walkers to exercise the physical

body by walking, exercise the mind by reading these devotions, and reflecting on them.

HISTORY AND OVERVIEW

The Walk to Bethlehem is an imaginary walk that encourages walkers to increase physical activity, spiritual growth and cultural awareness through virtual tour to Bethlehem. Since the first walks, churches and organizations throughout the United States and Canada have embraced this program. Many walkers have commented about how they have successfully increased their physical activity through this program because it is goal oriented and encourages team spirit and accountability. Walkers have enjoyed the focus on prayer and spiritual growth through devotions. Many walkers have found that their prayer time has increased and become more meaningful while walking.

WEEK 1- New Beginnings

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, and "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" Luke 1:39-42

Many can remember the excitement of that first day of school in the fall. We loved summer vacation, but the thrill of shopping for new school supplies and clothes, was invigorating. We looked forward to seeing school friends again and meeting our new teacher. It's interesting that for many, September still brings excitement and even a latent desire to sign up for a class, pursue a new hobby or call an old friend. When we are children, Bethlehem and Christmas seem afar off in September. The time span from September to Christmas seems shorter as the years pass and towards the end of our life, those months are but a flash. However, the resolve and excitement of a fresh start are still present. We are refreshed from the slower pace of summer and anxious to get back into a routine. As we begin our Walk to Bethlehem from Nazareth, think of how Mary felt while she was carrying Jesus. Shortly after Mary was told she would bear the Son of God, she went quickly to the hill country to visit

her cousin Elizabeth. The Scripture states that when Elizabeth was 6 months pregnant, Mary visited her and the babe leaped in Elizabeth's womb when Mary greeted Elizabeth. Mary's life would change radically after Jesus was born. Our lives also change radically with the birth of the Savior. When we are reborn in Jesus, life is never the same. We begin the walk of faith for a lifetime.

Just as we are transformed spiritually in our life of faith, The Walk to Bethlehem can also bring change and transformation into our lives. We can determine to take better care of the body God has given us. By beginning a physical walk with stated and measurable goals, we will find that we have more energy to accomplish those things that God has for us to do. Our physical, spiritual and emotional life will change positively and we will affect our world and those in our world in a positive way.

As we begin our journey to Bethlehem, let's begin by examining those things that help and hinder our transformation.

Questions to Ponder:

- What hinders me from living a disciplined life?
- Are there areas in my life that are disciplined?
- Are there areas in my life that are not disciplined?
 - Are these physical or spiritual disciplines?

- Is there something in my life-spiritual, physical or emotional that needs change and transformation?

Week 2- The Ripple Maker

And Jesus went all about the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the Kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity. Matthew 9:35

What does it take to change a community? What does it take to change a lifestyle? What does it take to change the world?

The Pike Street Market in Seattle is a wonderful myriad of tastes, smells, sights and sounds. Musicians frequently gather to entertain shoppers and the curious. The music is high quality and entertaining. A similar scene is acted out every day in cities across the world. People stand and listen respectfully, and then from the crowd, a brave soul breaks the silence and walks to the open violin case, depositing a gift of appreciation. Soon others break the silence and step up in a spirit of bashful thankfulness. The air is somewhat tense, but the music becomes sweeter.

Jesus was perhaps the greatest ripple maker who ever lived on this earth. Everywhere He went He influenced behavior for the good. His small band of disciples became ripple makers and today we who believe in

Jesus Christ are examples of the influence and courage of those early believers.

We all have the capability to be ripple makers and change agents in this world. We can begin by influencing our immediate group of friends, family and co-workers. A kind word, encouragement to make healthy lifestyle choices, to join a study group, to attend a worship service or to take a walk, are all positive ripples. Can we change to world? Yes!

As we Walk to Bethlehem we can also pray for our Missionaries and the people in those countries. As we walk to Bethlehem we can invite friends, other church members and neighbors to walk along with us. As we walk, we can speak words of hope and peace to them. That's what the ripple effect is all about: Influencing our world (personal, local and global) in a positive way-one person at a time.

Questions to ponder:

- Who are the people in my sphere of influence?
 - Am I a positive or negative ripple maker?
- How can I influence my friends, family and neighbors for good?
- Is there someone I can ask to walk alongside me?

Week 3- Ohana

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. Galatians 3:26-29.

Who is your Ohana? The Hawaiians have a wonderful word in their vocabulary that means family. The word means so much more than family. Ohana is the extended family of relationships that we have with each other. You don't have to be Hawaiian to be a part of the Ohana in Hawaii. It is simply understood that family and friends are bound together and members of the Ohana cooperate and honor each other.

When the angel of the Lord told Mary that she was to birth the son of God and that her relative Elizabeth was to have a child. "And when they had performed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with the wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him."

Luke 2:39-40

Mary hurried to see her blood relative Elizabeth for the support of her Ohana. As Jesus' ministry developed

we see that He formed a new family known as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Bloodlines and family trees are no longer required to be part of the family of God. Those who know Christ are part of the Ohana of God. When we become part of the family of God, we are bound by a most amazing blood relationship.

Questions to Ponder:

- Are your friendships superficial or deep?
- What makes a friendship deep and lasting?
- Do you have a friend you share personal struggles and joys with?
- Do you share personal struggles and joys with Jesus, the wonderful counselor?
- If not, how can you cultivate this friendship with God?

Week 4- Prince of Peace

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace". Isaiah 9:6

It is ironic that Bethlehem, the tiny town where Jesus was born, is now the center of division, barbed wired fences and threatening conflict. And yet, He is the Prince of Peace. Because He brings light, life and peace into a very dark world, there is tension.

The Light in the darkness creates tension. He came to break through darkness and He continues to do so. What a comfort it is to cling to these words from Isaiah which remind us that He is our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace.

I wonder if we would live differently if we reminded ourselves on a daily basis that Jesus Christ is our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. When darkness surrounds us, when we are overwhelmed with an important decision, when our world seems to be falling apart, how differently would we react to these situations if we constantly repeated these words from Isaiah; Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace!

As we walk this week, it may be appropriate to reflect on this description of the Messiah. It can be our prayer that the world will take note at this Christmas time of the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace.

May the Truth of the Christmas message break through the superficiality of the shopping frenzy and credit card debt. May we all have an opportunity to bring the Wonderful Counselor, The Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and the Prince of Peace to everyone we meet this Christmas season.

Questions to Ponder:

- What areas of the world need our special prayer at this time?
- What areas need to be surrounded by the Prince of Peace?
- In what ways can Jesus Christ be our Wonderful Counselor?
 - Through what means does He counsel us?

Week 5- The Light of the World

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness on them has light shined.” Isaiah 9:2

Photophobia is a condition that affects many individuals. It is described as the inability to tolerate light. This can include sunlight, fluorescent light or in extreme cases even daylight. One of the primary causes of this condition is the presence of cataracts. These cataracts cloud the vision and causes sensitivity to light. Cataract surgery is relatively routine procedure these days and most who have the surgery are amazed at how clearly they can see after the surgery. They usually comment that they had no idea how clouded their vision had been and they are amazed at the clarity of detail and brilliance of colors after the surgery.

The shepherds were overcome with awe and wonder when they saw the light of a multitude of angels announcing the Savior’s birth. The light did not blind them, however. They saw clearly and reacted appropriately. Are there times when our faith walk seems cloudy and we can’t tolerate the Light of Truth? Cloudy vision in our faith walk prevents us from discerning God’s call, recognizing the Shepherd’s

voice and moving forward in faith. We can protect our physical eyes by wearing ultraviolet sunglasses, but to maintain clear spiritual vision requires time spent in God’s Word, time spent in prayer and time spent worshipping our Lord Jesus Christ.

When our physical vision is cloudy, we shrink from the light and the colors are dull. When our physical vision is clear and healthy, we welcome the light and even desire to be closer to the light. When our vision is compromised, we prefer to remain in the dark. May we always have clear vision and desire to be close to the Light of Christ!

Questions to Ponder:

- What is the darkest place you’ve ever been? How did it feel?
 - What are some of the physical signs of cloudy vision? What are some of the spiritual signs of cloudy vision?
 - What steps can you take to improve your spiritual vision?

Thank you for journeying to
Bethlehem with us. Please
join us in celebrating the
end of our journey!